

The Builder.

NO. CCCLV.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 16, 1847.



WHEN the Society of Artists were incorporated in 1765, Mr. James Payne, the architect, purchased some ground in the Strand, belonging to Exeter House, and built for them an exhibition-room and academy, which he called *Tua Lyceum*.*

Dibdin, in his very brief account of the English Opera House,† says Garrick, after the termination of the society's operations, bought the lease to prevent the building from being appropriated to any theatrical purpose; but nevertheless, in 1790 a theatre was erected on the site for music and dancing. Four or five years after this, Dr. Arnold commenced a new theatre on the ground adjoining the Lyceum, but was stopped through the proprietors of the patent theatres, and gave up the lease he had obtained. In 1809 his son, Mr. S. J. Arnold, again purchased the lease, completed the theatre, and opened it for English operas. In 1812 he pulled down the old house, and, at a cost of little less than 80,000*l.*, erected and furnished the structure which immediately preceded the present "Royal Lyceum Theatre." The opposition of the other houses materially interfered with his plan; but, aided by the success of the inimitable Charles Mathews, the father of the present lessee, he managed to overcome the difficulties.

The front of the theatre then faced the Strand, and had a porch of eight Ionic columns, which supported a stone balcony with balustrade. Above were three tiers of windows, surmounted by a pediment. According to the account we have quoted, the auditory formed a portion of an ellipse, whose transverse diameter was 35 feet; the distance from the front boxes to the orchestra was only 30 feet. It contained two tiers of boxes and two galleries. It was one of the earliest works of Mr. S. Beasley, and appears to have had a good reputation for convenience.

The fate of most theatres attended the Lyceum. On the 16th of February, 1830, between 1 and 2 o'clock in the morning, a fire broke out in it, and in a very short time had enveloped the whole structure. One after another the houses in Exeter-street were swallowed up, until nearly the whole side of the street was a burning mass. The roof of the theatre fell in about 4 o'clock, and the destruction was complete, with the exception of the front in the Strand, which, with the old *Courier* newspaper office adjoining, escaped uninjured.

Some time elapsed before any arrangement was made for rebuilding the theatre. Mr. Beasley was again called in to prepare plans, and ultimately a contract was entered into with Mr. Arnold by Messrs Peto and Grissell,—the Duke of Sussex, Lord Saltoun, Sir Andrew Bouverie, and C. W. Hallett, Esq., having been first appointed trustees by Mr. Arnold to carry out certain contingent acts.

By the terms of the contract, the builders were not to receive the full amount of their contract, 17,900*l.*, unless completed by a certain day; if not till over that time and before the expiration of a month, 650*l.* less; and if not

done then, 400*l.* less still, and so on. This amount did not include painting, nor the erection of the green-room, dressing-rooms, and other apartments, which were postponed till 1838, and cost about 3,000*l.*‡

On Saturday, July 12, 1834, the new theatre was filled to witness a rehearsal of an opera, by Loder, called "Nourjahad," and on the following Monday it was opened to the public.†

The form of the building is shown by the accompanying plan of the theatre as it now is,‡ to which we shall refer again presently. Its appearance then may be recorded by quoting from the descriptions which appeared in the newspapers of the following day. From the paneling of the dress circle spring six tall, slight fluted columns, painted white, and gilt, and with gilt capitals, which are carried up to the line of the second box circle, or the gallery row, the front of which is formed of their cornice, and an imitative balustrade.

The front of the first circle of boxes was ornamented with a series of classical subjects, "pencilled in the fresco style," on a light cheerful ground. The second circle was decorated with imitations of drapery, in crimson and gold. The balustrade were of a pale rose colour, nearly approaching to white, and relieved with gold. The ceiling represented a shield, divided into compartments, emblazoned with the insignia of the musical profession and medallions of eminent professors.

In front of the dress circle a novelty was attempted, in the shape of a balcony, extending between three and four feet from the general range, and ornamented on the front with gilt lattice-work. This part of the house, however, was never popular, and was ultimately modified.

We happened to be present at the opening of the theatre on this occasion, and have a copy of the address which was then delivered: the latter part of it, which refers to the building, may be quoted here not inappropriately:—

"This unpretending fane is dedicate
To gentle arts that soften or elate,
Sentiment, pathos, are not banished hence;
Bold whim and jest shall mock at sadder sense;
And guiding every change with mild control,
Music shall rule and harmonize the whole.
One custom broken here may ask excuse;
We to the theatre restore its use:
We think that every gesture should be seen,
And words be heard, to know well what they mean.

Therefore for this small scope your favour pray,
Where you see what we do, hear what we say.
Must we mete greatness by the builder's rule;
Or is this house fit for the Drama's school?
Your kind encouragement success ensures—
Be this the Muse's temple, be it yours."

And so doubtless will say the present lessee, whose extensive embellishments have called for notice, and led us to these prefatory memoranda, and the following particulars of the building as it now stands.

The references attached to the plan will shew the purposes of the several parts. The Queen having reserved a box, and signified an intention of occasionally visiting the theatre, some few structural alterations were called for to obtain a private entrance for her Majesty.

The following are the principal dimensions, which, we believe, like the plan, have not before been published.

The entrance-hall is 26 ft. by 23 ft. 10 in., with a screen of coupled Doric columns on each side. The ceiling in the centre is arched and coffered, and 7 ft. high. The vestibule

and principal staircases are 61 ft. 8 in. by 20 ft. The ceiling over the centre is arched and coffered, and 36 ft. high. Over the entrance-hall is a saloon, decorated with pilasters and entablature, and having in the centre of the ceiling a lantern light, covered with a dome. The saloon is 36 ft. 2 in. by 23 ft. 10 in., and 21 ft. 3 in. high; the height under the centre of the dome is 33 ft. 6 in.

The walls of the parallellogram, inclosing the auditory and stage, and which support the great roof, are 2 ft. 8 in. thick, decreasing to 2 ft. 3 in. From the front of the stage to the back wall of boxes, is 43 ft. The extreme breadth of dress-circle is 52 ft. 10 in. The width of the stage opening 31 ft. From the proscenium to the back of stage, 41 ft., and behind this, there is 23 ft. in depth by 25 ft. in width, of extra stage.

The height from the highest part of the floor of the pit to the crown of the ceiling is 47 ft., and 3 ft. more from the lowest part of the pit.

The corridors which surround the auditory, are fire-proof, and the principal staircases are of stone. The floor of each circle consists of a curb 9 in. by 6 in., supported at intervals by cast-iron columns, to the head of each of which a double-flanged cast-iron bearer is bolted, the other end of which is firmly secured to the circular wall-timber. Binders 8 in. by 6 in. strapped and bolted with iron, and joists 5 in. by 2 in. complete the framing of the floors. The span of the great roof is 62 ft. in the clear of the walls, and the scantlings of the timbers are as follow:—

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| Tie beams (scarfed) | 13 × 8 |
| Straining ditto | 13 × 8 |
| Queen posts (oak) | 8 × 8 |
| Double ditto | 10 × 4 |
| Principal rafters | 12 & 10 × 8 |
| Auxiliary ditto | 10 & 8 × 8 |
| Common ditto | 5 × 2½ |
| Struts | 6 × 6 |
| Furlins | 8 × 6 |
| Straining Sills | 10 × 8 |
| Oak Corbels | 12 × 8 |
| Wall Plates | 12 × 12 |
| King Posts (oak) | 8 × 8 |

The columns and pilasters of the entrance portico, in Wellington-street, shewn in the plan, are of Portland stone, the entablature, pediment, and ornaments, of Roman cement.

Let us now look inside, and see the appearance that has been given to the house in the short space of three weeks. The central chandelier is taken away, and in the place it occupied, is painted the figure of Genius, surrounded by a border of fruit. Around this are flying cupids, connected by wreaths, which they bear, and inclosed by a second circular border (this time of flowers) within gilt bands. The lower and principal portion of the ceiling, all round, is occupied by figures of the Muses, the Seasons, and mythological groups, very nicely designed and painted, and is inclosed by a third border of flowers within bands.

The members of the cornice, from which springs the cored ceiling (circular in plan), are very fully gilt, and below is a frieze of rich Italian foliage, with mask-centres, and birds in high relief, taking the appearance of white China, as do all the applied ornaments throughout the house, etch-gilt on a rose-coloured ground. The columns which support the gallery remain as they were, and are gilt, but the gallery front is entirely changed; the imitative balustrade, before mentioned, has disappeared, and in its stead are panels, shewing clusters of fruit and flowers, painted on a white ground. On the cornice from which the front rises are nine groups of sitting boys, entwined with foliage, holding branches for lights, and

* *Harlequin's*—London, Vol. IV., p. 126.
† *Public Buildings of London*, Vol. I., p. 272.
‡ *Contemporary's Magazine*, Vol. C., p. 124.

‡ The side-building included the gallery stairs, consequently, until erected, a temporary staircase to that part of the house was required. This gave rise to a curious report, that the architect had forgotten to provide means of access to the gallery within the house, which appears to have been generally received, since we find a letter from the architect to the editor of *The Times*, explaining the circumstance, and constructing the following:
† The pieces played were, "The Yeoman's Daughter," "Call again to-morrow," and "The Merry Wives of Windsor."
‡ was not produced till two or three evenings afterwards.
‡ See p. 204.